

## Rochester Institute of Technology RIT Scholar Works

---

### Student Work

---

2006

# The Mind and Creations of Adolf Wolfli

Kara Howard

*Rochester Institute of Technology*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.rit.edu/student>

---

### Recommended Citation

Howard, Kara, "The Mind and Creations of Adolf Wolfli" (2006). Accessed from  
<http://scholarworks.rit.edu/student/15>

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by RIT Scholar Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Work by an authorized administrator of RIT Scholar Works. For more information, please contact [ritscholarworks@rit.edu](mailto:ritscholarworks@rit.edu).

### The Mind and Creations of Adolf Wölfl

Throughout history there have been an inconceivable number of people who have suffered from mental disorders. Unfortunately, because of their disorders, most were cast aside and dismissed by societies that assumed them to be completely useless and unable to effectively contribute. Many poor souls ended up in prisons or committed to warehouse asylums and were given no quality of life and little (if any) real treatment. Fortunately,

Image removed due to copyright

many famous and historical figures that suffered from mental disorders were not treated as such. Artists and historical figures like Beethoven, Thomas Jefferson, T.S. Eliot, Einstein, Van Gogh, Mark Twain, Andy Warhol, Edgar Allen Poe and Michelangelo, are all known or suspected to have suffered from some form of mental disorder. However, despite their suspected abnormal mental conditions, they all made amazing and innovative contributions to the world. Because their disorders were not recognized, they were given the chance to excel and develop their talents, and they gave the world art, music, literature and freedoms that might have been otherwise missed.

It is sad to think of the potential gain the world might have enjoyed if someone had just paid attention to and appreciated the things that 'crazy' people have had to contribute. Fortunately, a doctor named Walter Morgenthaler at the Waldau Mental Asylum in Berne, Switzerland saw in one of his patients the potential to make amazing contributions to society. Dr. Morgenthaler saw beyond Adolf Wölfl's schizophrenia, and saw in him a truly gifted artist. Without his doctor's support, Wölfl's innovative, original and amazing art would never have been seen by anyone outside of the Asylum, and would have been lost forever. Wölfl's disease and his art had a complex, interwoven relationship, and only by thoroughly understanding his disease, his life, and his art, can we truly understand the promise and talent that Dr. Morgenthaler saw in his most famous patient.

## His Disease

Schizophrenia is a psychological abnormality that affects approximately 1% of the human population. It tends to affect both males and females in equal numbers, but has different onset norms for each gender. In men, schizophrenia usually emerges in their late teens and early 20's, while women tend not to experience onset until their mid-20's or early 30's. Although it is equally distributed among all races, countries and cultures, there is a slight prevalence of schizophrenia cases amongst the lower social classes. In the lower classes, similar to that which Wölfi experienced, the stress of surviving is constant, thus schizophrenia is triggered more often than in higher classes. Schizophrenia is also proven to have a high tendency to occur in patients who were molested and/or abused as a child (as Wölfi was). Also, because schizophrenia is a socially debilitating illness, it can actually cause schizophrenics to end up living in poverty levels, as they often can't support themselves or make strong, supportive social connections.

Most schizophrenics are generally characterized as having a severely distorted perception of reality. They are sometimes distant, detached, and seem preoccupied with something unknown to others. Similarly, some are known to display catatonic behavior, when they will spend long periods of time in unnatural positions, completely immobile. At other times, schizophrenics can seem overly occupied, very alert, vigilant and animated. There are other, broad symptoms that characterize schizophrenia's affect on the mind, including hallucinations, delusions, disordered thinking, affective flattening, alogia and avolition.

Schizophrenics very often suffer from mild to massive hallucinations and illusions. These disturbances of perception are often very distressing and can be from any combination of the five senses. However, it is extremely common for schizophrenics to have hallucinations that involve the hearing of voices in their head. These voices can say any number of things, including describing the person's activities, carrying on conversation with the person or with other voices, warn the person of impending danger or doom, or even to issue orders to the person hearing them. The voices can be menacing, reassuring, or a combination of both. While hallucinations are imagined perceptions, illusions are real sensations that the mind of the schizophrenic individual misinterprets. For example, a schizophrenic may misinterpret a person's hand gently holding theirs as being a bear trap cutting the hand off and causing massive pain. Both hallucination and illusions can obviously be disturbing for both the sufferer of schizophrenia and for others around them. Research has found, however, that keeping the schizophrenic mind busy can be a good way to distract it from its hallucinations, as competing stimuli can "drown out" hallucinations and illusions.

Delusions, or false personal beliefs, are another indication of schizophrenia. Often clearly contradicted

by reason and reality, and not explained by cultural belief, schizophrenic delusions can vary in intensity and importance. They often run along themes, and can reflect certain categories of schizophrenia. One example of a theme is persecution, often common to paranoid schizophrenics. Delusions of persecution lead to fears of being victimized, cheated, harassed, and/or conspired against. Another common example is the delusion of grandeur, where the sufferer thinks that they are a famous or important person. Those who suffer from such delusions are very convinced by them and often can't and won't accept any alternative explanations for events or circumstances.

Disordered thinking is another element of schizophrenia. Many schizophrenics feel that they "can't think straight," as disconnected and random thoughts come and go very rapidly. They often are unable to focus on any one task, and are unable to decipher importance of events in their lives from moment to moment. This confusing, uncontrollable thought process makes communication with others difficult and sometimes impossible, often leading to social and physical isolation. However, some research claims that writing down thoughts and processes can often help schizophrenics to control and monitor their thinking. Often times, controlling thought processes can help schizophrenics control some other symptoms as well.

Schizophrenics also tend to exhibit "affective flattening," or a lowered expression of emotion. They often seem apathetic, expressionless, and speak in monotonic voices. Little or no motivations, alogia (lessening of speech fluency and productivity) and avolition (lack of goal-directed behavior) are also related signs of the disorder.

Another element of schizophrenia that is relevant to Adolf Wölfl's case is the interaction of nicotine with schizophrenics. Nicotine is found to be the most commonly used substance among schizophrenics, as at least 75-90% are reported as self-medicating addicts of tobacco and other products with nicotine. Unfortunately, the chemical nicotine interferes with the antipsychotic medications used to help schizophrenics, while cessation of nicotine use will often worsen schizophrenic symptoms. This obviously causes a problem with treating schizophrenics, like Wölfl, who use tobacco products.

The majority of schizophrenics are nonviolent, and thus relatively harmless to others. Some, however, like Wölfl can be very violent. This typically only occurs if the schizophrenic was violent or criminal before the onset of schizophrenia, and is more likely to occur in paranoid schizophrenics.

### His Life

Adolf Wölfl was born in Bern, Switzerland on February 29th, 1864 as the youngest of seven boys. Born into poverty, Adolf led a difficult life, in which he had little security, and for the most part, struggled to survive. His father, Jacob, was a stonecutter and an alcoholic criminal who abused and molested Adolf. He also abandoned his

Image removed due to copyright

family when Adolf was five, and died a few years later.

Adolf's mother, Anna worked hard as a seamstress in order to support the family, but around 1874 sadly also died. Wölfler spent the next 21 years of his life being bounced through a number of foster homes, working as a farmhand and at random jobs around Switzerland, as well as serving in the army.

As a teenager, Adolf fell in love with a wealthy young woman, but was forbidden by her parents to have anything to do with her. This was heartbreaking for Wölfler, and he returned to Bern, shortly after which he was convicted of child molestation and sent to prison. A few years after his term in prison, Wölfler's landlords and bosses noticed his behavior become odd and aggressive.

When he assaulted another child in 1895, he was committed to the Waldau Mental Asylum in Bern, where he would spend the rest of his days.

Diagnosed with schizophrenia, Wölfler suffered from hallucinations, psychosis and rage. Violent and disturbed, he was put into isolation to prevent him from hurting others. His violent aggression peaked in 1899, just as he was given pencils and paper and started to draw. This year marked an amazing turning point in Wölfler's life, as he began working on his career and his obsession; his art. He labored, producing an amazing number of works, until he died from intestinal cancer on November 6th, 1930.

### His Art

Having never shown any previous interest in, or understanding of art before 1899, Adolf Wölfler developed and executed an incredible artistic talent, creating over 25,000 pages of unique and fascinating art over the last 31 years of his life. Unfortunately, most of the works from his earliest years of drawing were lost. However, over 1,600 illustrations and 45 volumes of a massive autobiography by Wölfler were saved after his doctor, Walter Morgenthaler realized his brilliance. For the first time ever, a doctor recognized that despite his schizophrenia, a patient was of great importance to the art world, and that because of his talent and disorder was also important the world of psychopathology. The interaction of Wölfler's schizophrenic condition and his creativity produced an amazing

Images removed due to copyright

graphic visual style that most likely could not and would not have been produced had Wölfler not been ill.

In the first years of his artistic 'career,' Wölfler worked mainly on random, single-page compositions. He was given limited drawing supplies as a way of trying to control his rage and disease by diverting his attention from his hallucinations and channeling his thoughts into a controllable form. Exhausting his limited weekly supply of pencils, colored pencils (on occasion), and newsprint paper, Wölfler developed a unique style of dense, intricate, intense, fractal designs, using a high quality of patient draftsmanship, and his rage declined. Wölfler soon began to trade small works for extra supplies and for tobacco.

Although they evolve quite a bit, Wölfler's works throughout his artistic period display many similar characteristics and symbols that define him as an artist as well as a troubled schizophrenic. His pieces are all fantastical, telling stories through unique and complex visual, musical and written vocabularies.

Wölfler's visual vocabulary consisted of many two-dimensional forms that repeat themselves in his work throughout his artistic career. He uses basic graphic elements such as the "ring of bells" and the "steam-propeller-

Figure 1 - His visual vocabulary.



ring” as borders and visual connectors that carry the eye through his pieces. One of the most important themes to arise in a great number of his works is the “bird”. The “bird” is a simple geometric figure that seems to represent both life and femininity to Wölfi. However, more significant in terms of his disease is his depiction of faces in most of his works ( see figure 1). The actual graphic rendering of the faces evolves over the years, and they clearly represent not just Wölfi himself and the people in his life, but also the people whom he has imagined in his life and the voices in his head. The placement and emphasis of the faces rarely depicts them as being of any importance. They tend to just exist where they are as a matter-of-fact, and often there are literally dozens of them laid out within a single composition. This is most likely a channeled reaction to or expression by Wölfi of the schizophrenic symptom of hearing voices and having paranoid and grandiose delusions.

In addition to his visual artistic vocabulary, Wölfi also did a great deal of writing, which intertwined and interacted with his visual art. In 1908 Wölfi began writing his 45-volume, 25,000-page autobiographic epic prose, which was unfinished at his death. His epic contains five main groups of themes that describe different period of his life as well as elements of his delusional “Creation.”

Image removed due to copyright

In the first group of books, *From the Cradle to the Grave*, Wölfi describes his horrible childhood in the form of a fantastical travelogue that not only includes events and memories from his real life, but an entire lifetime’s worth of implausible engagements. He writes of and illustrates himself meeting kings, queens, and princesses, and his travels to places he had never physically been. He often refers to himself as being a king or emperor, and writes from both his true perspective as Adolf, but also from the perspective of his alter ego, the child “Doufi” (see figure 2).

His second set of books, *Geographic and Algebraic Books*, is written mostly to his nephew, Rudolf. It is a detailed, delusional description of how Rudolf can build the “Saint Adolf-Giant-Creation.” Wölfi is basically giving his nephew directions on

Figure 2 - City Map of New York, 1910

how he can build a massive empire in order to buy, rename, urbanize and appropriate the world and then the entire cosmos. Wölfler then goes on to fill books with entire pages covered in numbers and musical pictures depicting the way to track the massive financial capital of the "Creation" (see figure 3).

In the works following *Geographic and Algebraic Books*, Wölfler begins to only refer to himself in a delusion of grandeur as "Saint Adolf II." At this time he also begins creating his "bread art," which was his term for separate, higher-quality works he created for clients in order to make the money to purchase more supplies and tobacco.

The last three sections of Wölfler's epic are *Books with Songs and Dances*, *Album Books with*

Image removed due to copyright

Figure 3 - The Palace of the Inquisition on the St. Adolf-Star-Giant-Creation, 1914

Image removed due to copyright

*Dances and Marches*, and *Funeral March*, which he worked on until his death in 1930. In these sections, Wölfler writes much more than he draws, but he also introduces some new visual elements. These new elements include collage work which oddly represents many important events and innovations of the times, but which he works into his epic writing. This ability of Wölfler's to recognize important global events is very rare for schizophrenics, even if he had not been in an asylum, isolated from the world (see figure 4).

With these last sections, Wölfler also places more emphasis on a form of expression that had existed in his work, but only in limited forms until this point; musical

Figure 4 - Kraft Cheese, 1929



Image removed due to copyright

Figure 5 - Grammophon, 1915

compositions. He works the scores of music beautifully into his visual artworks, but they are very clearly meant to be read as musical compositions as opposed to purely visual art. He often 'played' his compositions on a cardboard trumpet and called himself a composer. Waldau Asylum employees did note that the trumpet did not actually play the music that Wölfler perceived it to play (see figure 5).

Overall, it seems that Wölfler's art and writings were channeled products of a disturbed, but gifted mind. The symptoms of schizophrenia developed and fed an artistic talent that produced art, which was unlike any the world had ever seen, or has seen since. Wölfler's works were true expressions of his thoughts and perceptions of a fantastical, complex world, which only he will ever truly know and understand.

During Wölfler's time, the mentally ill were rarely treated with the same respect as a talented, successful professional would have been treated. Fortunately, Dr. Morgenthaler had the intelligence and humanity in him to recognize a true and talented artist as such, despite an intense mental disability. Wölfler may have suffered terribly from symptoms that his care providers could not help him with, but his pain was not in vain, as his illness brought stunning and passionate contributions to the world of art. More than just a schizophrenic, Adolf Wölfler was an artist, musician, composer, storyteller, poet, and an original visionary.

Image removed due to copyright

Figure 6 - Holy St. Adolf Tower, 1919

Works Cited

Adolf Wölfli Foundation, <http://www.adolfwoelfli.ch>, accessed 1/25/2006.

Longhauser, E., *The Galleries at Moore, The Other Side of the Moon: The World of Adolf Wölfli*,  
<http://thegalleriesatmoore.org/publications/woelfli.shtml>, accessed 1/23/2006.

Phyllis Kind Gallery, *Art Brut – Adolf Wölfli*, <http://www.phylliskindgallery.com/self-taught/artbrut/awl/>,  
accessed 1/23/2006.

Raw Vision, *Adolf Wölfli*, <http://www.rawvision.com/back/wolfli/wolfli.html>, accessed 1/23/2006.

Spoerri, E., Baumann, D., in conjunction with The American Folk Art Museum, New York, *St. Adolf-Giant-  
Creation: The Art of Adolf Wölfli*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ; 2003.

Spoerri, E., Baumann, D., & Gomez, E.M., Mental Help Net; Schizophrenia and Psychosis, *Book Review – The Art  
of Adolf Wölfli*, [http://www.mentalhelp.net/poc/view\\_doc.php?id=2178&type=book&cn=7](http://www.mentalhelp.net/poc/view_doc.php?id=2178&type=book&cn=7),  
accessed 1/23/2006.

Spoerri, E., ed., *Adolf Wölfli; Draftsman, Writer, Poet, Composer*, Cornell University Press,  
Ithaca and London; 1997.

Supermarky deSage Unltd., Inc., *Adolf Wölfli (a little Adolf Wölfli page)*, <http://www.supermarky.org/aaSkt.adolfII.html>,  
accessed 1/23/2006.

The Anthony Petullo Collection of Self-Taught & Outsider Art, *Adolf Wölfli*, [http://www.petulloartcollection.com/  
artistprofile.asp?refartistid=55](http://www.petulloartcollection.com/artistprofile.asp?refartistid=55), accessed 1/23/2006.

Wikipedia, *Adolf Wölfli*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adolf\\_Wölfli](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adolf_Wölfli), accessed 1/23/2006.